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Convenience, loyalty and customising users: the behaviours and intentions of young online news users in Australia

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Abstract

The implications of the shift to online news consumption for journalism cultures and practices have attracted considerable scholarly attention and public debate. Less well considered are the implications of online news consumption for and by young people. This paper reports on research into the behaviours and intentions of online news consumers, 18-30 years of age, to propose three distinctive types of user (convenience, loyal and customising). Also opened up for discussion are questions about the strategic value to commercial news organisations of audience-centred empirical research that seeks to respond to the crisis of professional journalism.

Introduction

The past decade has seen enormous growth in online news and information services. The proportion of individuals who access newspapers or news magazines online grew substantially in all OECD countries over the 2000s. In some countries, the percentage of the population accessing news online now exceeds the percentage getting their news from print sources, being as high as 77 per cent of the population in South Korea and 57 per cent in the United States (Pew, 2008; OECD, 2010). In Australia, the country in which the study reported here was completed, the five most popular online news sites (news.com.au, ninemsn, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation) are among the 25 most accessed sites in Australia (Alexa, 2010). The Australian Press Council found that the number of unique views of Australian online news sites doubled between 2006 and 2008, with more than 19 million unique browser views per month for eight commercial online news sites (thus excluding the ABC) in June 2009 (APC, 2008).

A considerable amount of work has been undertaken on the implications of this shift to on-line news consumption for journalism cultures and practices (Allen, 2006; Deuze, 2006, 2009; Domingo, 2008), user participation and interactivity (Fortunati, 2009; Fenton, 2010) and media political economy and the public sphere (McNair, 2006; Mosco, 2009). Other studies have investigated the possibilities for new voices and alternative forms of journalism to evolve and flourish (Bruns, 2008; Atton & Hamilton, 2008) and the rise of citizen journalism (Allen, 2009; Flew, 2007, 2009; Flew & Wilson, 2010). Such developments can be read in terms of a wider shift away from the mass communications media forms and practices that dominated the 20th century towards networked social media. This is part of an even wider set of shifts associated with the rise of knowledge-intensive service and creative industries, the network effects of the internet, and the rise of participative media practices and social production (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; OECD, 2007; Flew, 2009). For critics of how news production has evolved over the past 30 years, such as Todd Gitlin (2009), these factors are indicative of a wider crisis in professional journalism, which is associated with:

1. Declining newspaper circulation numbers and advertising revenues (both classified and print), that were accentuated by the economic downturn of 2008-2009 after the global financial crisis;
2. Commercial media businesses acquiring high levels of debt in the 2000s, and struggling to develop new business models for the internet economy;
3. A shift in the "attention economy" of media users, who deal with media proliferation by seeking multi-media combinations and spending less time consuming any single media product or service;
4. A crisis of authority for professional journalism arising from the shift from the "high modernist" era of crusading investigative journalism and one-off features towards the 24-hour news cycle, "churnalism" and the need to continuously reproduce news around familiar themes and formats;
5. A growing public distrust of journalists as they are increasingly being seen by the public as uncritical conduits for material provided to them by well-funded political, business and other special interests (c.f. Davies, 2009).

Alienation from audiences is an important overarching feature of the current crisis of professional journalism. This is also evident in allied debates about the extent to which ageing and declining readerships and audiences for the products of journalism reflect changes in the modes and intensities of civic engagement (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007; Dahlgren & Ols-son, 2008; Macnamara, 2008). Debates about the influence and role of media on civic engagement have tended to divide along pessimistic and optimistic lines. Most recently, pessimists have identified fragmentation as a significant factor in the decline of democratic civil participation, as the capacity of media to support population-wide conversations diminishes (Simons, 2007) along with mass media business and communication models. Optimists point to the great variety of ways in which new media are used and in effect can obliterate distinctions between media and political engagement (Silverstone, 2007). In any event, there is a sense of urgency about the need to overcome the limits of journalism-centred norms of news consumption and to better understand news from the perspectives of users – especially younger news users.

Professional journalism evolved in the 20th century with a largely tangential relationship to its audiences, and there remains considerable suspicion about the value of both user comments and input into the news production process (Wardle & Williams, 2008). At the same time, as John Hartley has argued, the internet and digital media technologies are bringing the public back to the forefront of journalism research as:

The industrial-era model of one-way, one-to-many, read-only, mass communication that sees the populace as an object (of policy and campaigns) is now sup-

plemented if not supplanted by two-way, peer-to-peer, read and write, networked communication where popular culture is once again the subject and agent of its own representation (Hartley, 2010, p. 23).

Yet there is unease with referring to online users as “consumers”, “audiences” or “publics”. Uncertainty persists about how these online users might be theorised and succinctly described. There are also considerably divergent accounts of the extent to which the online environment promotes user empowerment and participation. Often missing from these accounts have been empirical investigations of what people are doing with online news media sites: why are they going to them, what do they seek and how do their patterns of use differ from those associated with more established print media or broadcasting?

Previous Australian studies on this topic have led to potentially contradictory conclusions. On the one hand, a study of 1356 people by AC Nielsen, undertaken for the Australian Communications and Media Authority, found that after email, searching for news, sports and weather was the second most popular online activity (along with online banking), with 72 per cent of the study participants accessing news online in the previous four weeks. The Nielsen report forecast the use of online news, sport and weather to grow by 5 per cent over the year to 2009. However, the study also claimed that online news, sports and weather were not a priority for 18-34 year olds and that those aged younger than 34 are less likely to use the internet for news and/or information services, instead preferring online forms of entertainment (ACMA, 2008, pp. 15-18).

These findings suggest divergent possibilities for interpretation. On the one hand, although younger media users seek out news, they increasingly refer to newer forms such as blogs or citizen journalism, or to satirical and irreverent “newstainment” programs such as *The Daily Show* in the US or *The Chaser* and *The 7pm Project* in Australia (Harrington, 2008): mainstream news is of little interest to them. The online versions of print newspapers are perceived as a mature product in a mature market, and can trade off inevitable decline against a degree of knowledge about their middle-class and middle-aged and ageing readerships. Alternatively, it could be that mainstream news is of considerable interest to younger media users, but needs to be packaged and presented differently, in ways that are responsive both to high levels of digital literacy and to readerships that are more critical and less deferential towards the established codes and conventions of print journalism. Rather than accepting that they will be approached as passive media consumers, these readers expect interactivity and the opportunity for personal input into media products (Deuze, 2006; McWilliam, Hartley & Gibson, 2008; Coleman & Ross, 2010).

User behaviours among younger online news consumers

Paradoxically, the ability to monitor and track patterns of online site use means that far more is known about what people are actually doing with the online media product than was ever the case with print newspapers or magazines. This kind of data enables media owners to get better deals with advertisers and demonstrate higher figures in order to bolster their share prices, but they tell us very little about the users of their media products beyond this. Against this background, QUT Creative Industries researchers associated with the Smart Services Cooperative Research Centre partnered with Fairfax Digital¹ to generate a framework for interpreting changing patterns of engagement and interaction among young people with online news and information services.

All media organisations whose fortunes were built on the back of print newspapers face the dilemma of how to attract younger people to their online news sites. Is it that younger people are simply not interested in engaging with mainstream news online, or is the problem with the forms of engagement? In order to address these questions, we undertook to analyse the attitudes of people aged 18-30 to online news and information, and particularly to established news mastheads. The research was undertaken in two stages.

First, an online survey was developed and publicised on a variety of sites, including those that were part of the Fairfax group, such as *Brisbane Times* and *The Vine*, and non-Fairfax sites such as *MAP Online* and *Crikey*, as well as a variety of social chatboards popular with this demographic. The survey consisted of 25 questions that relied on a mix of open-ended, rank-ordered and closed responses to ascertain online news and information uses, preferences and demographic information about respondents. Questions probed preferences for different genres of online news and information (for example, breaking news, real-time traffic, weather and sports, news and current affairs, opinion, citizen journalism opportunities, and specialist or niche sources of news and information). Questions addressed the influence of various factors on news consumption choices, including levels of interest in local, regional, national and international sources, drivers and response mechanics. Platforms and devices used for accessing online news and information, as well as locations of access (for example, home or work) were also canvassed. Preferences for online news and information were compared with preferences for other platforms. Respondents were also invited to agree or disagree with a statement about the role of news brands in influencing consumption choice. Questions also aimed to ascertain user preferences for online and offline media as well as demographic details such as age, genre, postcode, occupation, education level and birthplace.

The survey received 524 completed responses, and a reasonably close alignment was achieved between the survey respondents and readership demographics, with 50 per cent of respondents aged 18-24 and 80 per cent under 30. Sixty per cent of respondents were female. Half were students, 30 per cent were in professional occupations and the remainder were evenly balanced between manual labour, unemployed, retirees, homecare and business owners. The least represented group were trades, capturing only 1 per cent of the occupation segment. Levels of educational attainment were also high. In all, 79 per cent of respondents were involved in tertiary study or held tertiary qualifications. Some 3 per cent had apprenticeships, and 18 of these respondents had completed high school. As the survey was strongly promoted among sources in the state of Queensland, 74 per cent of the respondents were from this state, with 67 per cent from south-east Queensland and 7 per cent from regional Queensland.

A key limit of the survey was the fact that it was only administered online, so results were likely to favour online sources of news and information over other platforms. This could also have contributed to skewing to young respondents, although a more significant factor in this respect was the recruitment strategy of this university-based research activity which recruited heavily through student cohorts and social networks. One final limit on the analysis of survey results reported here is the focus on age as the key variable of interest in consumption choices and preferences (rather than gender, for example).

Analysis of survey findings indicated that there were three broad, yet distinct, types of online news and information users. Focus groups were conducted to test and refine this typology, with focus group participants drawn from the pool of survey respondents. A total of 54 respondents participated in hour-long focus group sessions conducted over four days, with an average of eight people in each group. The focus group participants were segmented by age (18-24 and 25+) and user type. The views of non-metropolitan-based survey respondents who were unable to attend the focus groups held in Brisbane were also captured in this phase of research by email and telephone conversations. The following typology of user characteristics was generated from this research process:

1. "Convenience users", who often access online news by "push" means (i.e., from other applications they are using), and are not strongly engaged with news as a media form. This group accounted for about 60 per cent of those surveyed;
2. "Loyal users", who are more intentional users of online news sites and who seek out established news mastheads. This group accounted for about 30 per cent of those surveyed;

3. "Customisers", who are highly active and engaged seekers of online news and information, but who seek multiple sources and are the most critical of mainstream media. In some cases, they have become online news and information producers themselves. This group accounted for about 10 per cent of those surveyed.

Detailed findings on the characteristics of each of these user types, including their interest in online news, are considered below. This is followed by consideration of the implications of this use-based segmentation of young people and online news for both news organisations and further research.

Convenience users

The research identified "convenience users" as those who arrive at online news sites primarily through forward linking mechanisms pushed to them via a social network or email application. Applications that survey respondents used and the associated news sites accessed via automatic redirection included Bigpond email (Bigpond news, a service provided by telecommunications company Telstra), Gmail (Google News), Hotmail and MSN Messenger (ninemsn, a collaboration between Microsoft and the Nine television network), and Yahoo! Mail (Yahoo! News, a collaboration between Yahoo! and the Seven television network). The common theme across this group is exemplified here:

They feed news to you. It's the headline that you usually read, because it's just there, that's what comes up, and there's links that you can click too if you're interested. If I'm really interested I'll go further (Female, 18-24).

I don't seek news. If I log into ninemsn or something and the msn today window pops up and there's an interesting story or article link I'll click on it. But I don't access news websites purposefully myself (Female, 18-24).

I don't use anything specific. I just hit ninemsn and trawl around and have a look at what's there (Female, 25+).

This was the largest group of online news users, accounting for 60 per cent of those surveyed, and was highest among those aged 18-24 years. The high active use of online news and information services among this group corresponds with a similarly high active use of email, messenger and social network services. Among this group, the ninemsn site was the most widely used, as it is the default home page on Microsoft's Internet Explorer software through MS Office packages bought in Australian stores. News sites linked to an email home page were used by 29 per cent of all survey respondents, with ninemsn the primary online news site for 21 per cent of total users, and 84 per cent of those aged 18-24 nominating ninemsn as their favourite online news site. Many also access online news and information through links provided by friends on Facebook, with 37 per cent of survey respondents aged 18-24 years nominating Facebook as their overall favourite website. As one respondent explains:

I'll see a news report and if I think it's relevant to my group of friends I'll just jump onto Facebook, link it, send it out and then get replies from other friends. And they might link articles they've seen and things like that for me too (Female, 25+).

In terms of preferred online news content, study participants classified as convenience users tended to enjoy items that were short, concise and "glossy". They preferred content that leaned towards gossip, light entertainment and "offbeat" news over more conventional news such as politics or international affairs. For example, focus group participants who nominated perezhilton.com, who.com and thedailyshow.com as their favourite news websites explained that such sites were:

Easy to read and can help with conversation topics (Female, 18-24).

Have lots of celebrity gossip (Female, 18-24).

Provide alternative, satirical views to US news (Male, 18-24).

The choice of content further reflects the consumption habits of this group, who often engaged with online news to alleviate boredom or to relax after a busy day and often while engaging in other online forms of social networking, as these following responses suggest:

Whenever I'm on the net I flick between my email account, Facebook and news websites (Male, 25+).

I use Facebook an awful lot and I tend to have other things open at the same time, so I'll have news open. I'll often discuss the news when I'm talking to someone online. If I've got a news website open I'll discuss things with them (Female, 25+).

While this group are active seekers and users of targeted, niche information and news in the form of special interest community blogs and (particularly among convenience users aged 25 years and over) sports information and results, they do not perceive such services as being "news". In other words, while this group does not seek mainstream news and current affairs, they will actively engage with news items that suit their current tastes and interests. This is further reflected in the survey results and discussions in focus group sessions that suggest convenience users place a lower value on online news and information than do users who actively seek out news.

Indeed, study participants aged between 18-24 years who were classified as "convenience users" were not particularly interested in mainstream news: they do not see it as relevant to them. If they do engage with mainstream news, it is often news delivered in the form of satire or comedy current affairs, such as the ABC's *The Chaser* television series, or personality or celebrity driven news. This does not necessarily indicate that these users have disengaged with traditional news, but that it has not featured strongly in their media consumption patterns thus far. As one respondent explains:

I used to watch the TV news with the family, but I found it very much one sided. You only get one part of the argument, so it doesn't interest me as much anymore. I don't really care for much about current affairs. I find news myself, I don't really look at one thing (Female, 25+).

This is the group that authors such as Young (2008) have worried will not acquire the "news habit" as they get older or, in so far as they engage with news and current affairs, it will not be the forms of "hard news" that traditional newspapers have championed.

Loyal users

The second group of users identified in the research data are described as "loyal users". These constituted 31 per cent of all respondents, and were the second largest of the groups identified. They are more intentional users of online news sources than convenience users, and typically exhibit loyalty to a particular news brand such as the ABC, News Corporation sites or Fairfax news sites:

News services provided by major media publishers are the most useful as their stories have been through the usual accuracy checks (Male, 25-39).

Loyal users were the group most likely to read physical newspapers, and their intentional use of online news services closely reflected their offline choices:

I buy the newspaper daily, but I find that I go to the internet quite often because it gives me more. It's more often updated whereas the newspaper's only really valid for half the day and then more news is coming through and you have to wait until

the next day. So if I do want to know something then I go to their internet service (Female, 18-24).

Loyal users valued the quality and reputation of news organisations, returning to favourite online news sources out of habit and to follow breaking news. Typically, loyal users were aged over 24 and were strongly attracted to sites such as ABC Online, the Fairfax sites smh.com.au and theage.com.au, and overseas news sites such as the BBC, *The New York Times*, sina.com and CNN.

When questioned on trust and accuracy, loyal users expressed a belief that news services provided by major media publishers were best resourced and had the most credible news brands, and that as a result more accurate information and a higher quality of journalism could be expected. Loyal users distinguished between professional and citizen/amateur journalism, were alert to questions of news bias, and would seek multiple perspectives on major issues from preferred and trusted news sources. Their engagement with preferred news services led loyal users to feel an allegiance to the viewpoints and opinions expressed by professional journalists and editors, and as a result they would return to favourite online news sources both out of habit and to follow important and significant news events. This is exemplified in the following focus group comments:

I go for *The Australian* if I want really reliable information. It's a bit dense, it's a lot harder to get, but it's a higher level of information, a higher education level. But if I want reliable facts, I believe their authors and their journalists aren't going to write something false (Female, 18-24).

The authors aren't "wanna be" journalists. They know their information and how to present it to their audience (Female, 18-24).

The study found that loyal users had a surprisingly low propensity to interact with news items, and while they strongly valued the potential to participate in activities such as commenting on stories or participating in online polls, they were often highly critical of the poor quality of comments and other input on such sites. Discussion emerging from the focus group sessions produced responses such as:

It's good to see other people's point of view. It helps you realise that there's other people just as passionate about you on the other side of the fence that might give you a different idea on what you think (Female, 25+).

I'll read the article and then I'll spend just as much time or even more time reading the comments on the page because I think it gives a different look. I find it always interesting because there's always debate going on (Male, 18-24).

Comments give so many more dimensions to what you're reading and that's important (Female, 18-24).

I see the comments as entertainment value. I'm addicted to them. There are some stupid people in the country. It's great. People have arguments with each other and they're hilarious to follow (Male, 25+).

I think the fact that there are so many opinions weakens the articles' values (Female, 18-24).

Loyal users actively responded to the development of brand communities, for example, by joining a preferred news provider's Facebook page or Twitter feed. Loyal users tended to regard themselves as informed consumers of news, but acknowledged that they were influenced by those whose opinions they respect and trust, such as family members and friends as well as reputable journalists. Loyal users tended not to publish, post or email news items, and in the main preferred instead to talk about news in social settings with family and friends. As one respondent explained:

You've got to remember that you don't know who's providing these opinions: it might be complete nut cases who don't know what they're talking about who might be completely irrational. Sometimes it's just more reliable doing the old fashioned thing and going and talking about it. At the end of the day I like going home and discussing it with my parents because I trust their opinion more than what I'd read on the internet. I might say, oh I saw someone say something like this, what do you think? I think we still crave something from someone we know personally. And then you're getting so much more of a richer understanding by just either agreeing or disagreeing with someone else's opinion. (Female, 18-24)

The bulk of loyal users were aged over 24 and were comfortable with new technologies: in many instances this group accessed online news sites from work, contributing to the view that "lunch time is the new prime time" with online media (Huxley, 2008). In light of these results, it is perhaps not surprising that of the three groups of users the study identified, loyal users had the highest propensity to pay for certain types of online news. The issues loyal users nominated that may be seen to influence their propensity to pay were better time management; a desire for a reliable and trustworthy news service that filters out unnecessary and unwanted news; and access to financial benefits for technology use through employment. These can be seen in the following comments:

If it was exclusive or relevant or tailored or something, something different that you wouldn't get anywhere else (Female, 25+).

I think that if you're paying for something you want to make sure that you're getting the right information or whether it's by a certain journalist or whatever that might be. But I don't think I'd pay two dollars for something when I can just search it online or find it another way. So I guess it's a bit of loyalty in terms of a journalist or a company (Female, 25+).

Customisers

The third group identified in the research were described as "customisers", or lead users of online news and information services and applications. Customisers were the smallest group to emerge from the survey, comprising only 9 per cent of respondents, and were typically professionals aged over 24. They are highly active users of online news who believe that online information is completely customisable. They are not loyal to any one news brand, instead cherry-picking news items across a variety of sources and subscriber feeds:

I like that I can get specialised information, so I can get it sent to me exactly what I want, I don't have to waste lots of time trying to find what I want to find and I like that I can do it quickly. I don't really want to spend any more time on the computer, I don't really, so I probably don't want to look at unfiltered websites (Male, 25+).

The news consumer must be vigilant in delving deeper to discover the truth, I want something that's a bit more targeted. I tend to pick and choose. It's too broad otherwise, there's too much noise. If you're careful you can build a really good network of people who see things in a similar way. If not you can get it real noisy and people yelling and stuff (Male, 25+).

Customisers value accuracy, reliability and timeliness, and are the group most critical of what they perceive to be biases and other limitations of mainstream news media (often described as "MSM"). Customisers are engaged and active news propagators and disseminators who blog, comment, forward links and re-publish news: they are the group most closely resembling what Bruns (2008) has termed "producers".

Customisers were distinguished from loyal users by their active engagement and interest in automating and customising the process of pulling news from a variety of sources, and interacting, manipulating and spreading it across their social networks. Customising users will invest time in personalising news content and delivery to increase their news experience by filtering out unwanted news while targeting "official" or authentic sources. They actively blog, comment, link to and re-publish news. They are proficient in the uses of Web 2.0 applications such as Wikipedia and Twitter, tend to favour RSS feeds and news aggregators, and may also be early adopters of mobile platforms for receiving and contributing to news. This is more apparent in customisers aged over 25, whose mobile telephony costs are often borne through their employment. Customisers actively manage their online identity and may also make use of brand community tools such as Twitter feeds and Facebook pages, especially if these tools support the "spreadability" of the customising user's identity across the internet as well as their aggregation within the brand community.

Customisers have significant value as brand promotion agents in social networks, and are potentially important sources of insight into lead user behaviours in relation to the development of online news and information services. At the same time, as noted above, they are the group most critical of the conventions of mainstream news media. They best exhibit the paradox of social media, as the lead users who are on the one hand the most active builders of new forms of online community, and therefore an appealing group for those corporate players seeking to "harness the hive" (Herz, 2005; Bruns, 2008), but also the most actively resistant to what they see as strategies to manipulate their activities for corporate gain, or what Bruns (2008) terms "hijacking the hive". They referred to the high exit costs of social media services (Spurgeon, 2008, p. 110), including the loss of time invested in developing new skills for each platform and the time and knowledge needed for product migration, for example, from Myspace to Facebook to Twitter. They also emphasise a preference for minimal "red tape" when using and registering for news and information sites, and were irritated by multimedia advertisements when unable to use advertisement blocking software.

When queried on their propensity to pay for online news and information services, customisers perceived that they already pay for news via mobile and broadband data fees, and were also highly resistant to attempts to make them pay for the "same old stuff" that they have been able to access for free, particularly if it is not innovative or challenging established media hierarchies. In so far as they were prepared to pay for online news, they would prefer to support new, more niche oriented providers such as Crikey than the mainstream news organisations, seen as conservative and resistant to change, commenting:

I would consider it but it would have to be very good. If it were analysis that wasn't just opinion. It would have to be very incisive and it would have to be something that I wanted to support (Male, 25+).

If I was asked to pay for an article I'd try other media outlets to get the article for free. It becomes like a challenge. Why pay when I could just walk into a newsagent, pick up the paper, read the article and then walk out (Female, 18-24).

I'd be prepared to pay for rich info, if it was something special or unique (Female, 18-24).

Implications of the findings

One implication of this research is that there is no single set of attitudes prevailing among young people towards online news, or indeed news generally. Our survey and focus group research showed there were at least three reasonably distinct attitudinal segments in the younger

online news market – convenience users, loyal users and customisers. It should be noted that there is no *prima facie* reason why these categories would be particular to young people, although this exists alongside the common presumption, partly supported by evidence, that the “news habit”, and related preferences towards public broadcasting, documentary programs, and so on, tend to become stronger as people get older, at least according to past surveys of Australian cultural consumption (Frow, Bennett & Emmison, 1999). Notwithstanding, the strategies of news organisations would need to vary in order to engage each type of user.

For example, one important finding of this study is that loyal users would be the group with the highest propensity to pay for online news, as they have strong commitments to accessing news and the most loyalty to established news brands. As they constituted about 30 per cent of research participants, news media might be well served by further research that ascertains the size of the younger loyal news consumer market in the general population, and what they value in particular new mastheads or “brands”. While this strategy would not have traction with the other two segments, it may prove helpful among media companies who have been exploring payment for online news in recent years. For example, subscription-only access to online news would be strongly resisted by customising users, among whom there was a strong view that they were already paying heavily for online services through their access plans. News Corporation has perhaps been the most vocal proponent of the view that media companies did themselves a disservice by making news freely available online, as online advertising revenues have never covered the loss of print sales and subscriptions. It has also been the international leader in introducing “pay walls” for its online content on sites such as *The Times* (UK), *The Wall Street Journal* (US) and, most recently, *The Australian*.

This study found that the level of uptake of news services via mobile devices was low compared with desk-based internet. Two major factors specific to Australia that may explain this are slow download speeds and costly mobile data plans. In 2009, when the study was undertaken, Australia ranked 16th among OECD nations for broadband density (OECD, 2008), and limits on data downloads were a common practice among the major telecommunications providers. Clear correlations could be identified between access to high speed internet services and time spent online, with metropolitan internet users spending on average 3.16 hours per week longer online than non-metropolitan users, in a context where 46 per cent of those in cities had access to broadband services, compared with 24 per cent in non-metropolitan areas (ACMA, 2008). It would therefore be anticipated that demand for online news, as with other online services, would increase as broadband became faster and more widely available with the rollout of the National Broadband Network (NBN). Mobile plans that set caps on data downloads were a significant barrier to online services of all forms for young people.

All groups surveyed take online news as a given, and for most it is their preferred means of accessing news. When asked which news sources they found to be most reliable, there was a strong general tendency for those aged 18-24 to favour online news, and for those over 25 to see online, print newspapers and radio as comparable sources. Among the reasons for preferring online news were: speed of updating information; real-time live-feed delivery; convenience; links to other news and information sites; the ability to search across multiple sources; and multimedia capabilities. Survey results on reasons for accessing online news and information sources suggested that at least 68 per cent of survey respondents accessed online news and information services to maintain currency with world events and 19 per cent sought entertainment, gossip, lifestyle events or sports information. One key comment from a survey respondent summarising why online news is the preferred medium was that it is:

Quick to access and you can read about an issue from various points of view, both local and international, from different political points of view and personal points of view as this varies between journalists. Also, you can read about a topic across various genres that might treat it with varying levels of formality, depth etc. This

enables the development of a more well-rounded opinion and can also let you tailor what you read to your mood, level of interest and so forth (Female, 25+).

Overwhelmingly and across all online news user types, survey respondents most often access online news in the home or at work and via cable or wireless broadband. One question that arose from the ACMA (2008) study was whether and why users aged 18-24 accessed news online. Comparing survey responses submitted by those aged 18-24 years with those aged over 25 enabled us to draw representative conclusions regarding the consumption of online news. There were notable differences in the online news consumption habits of these two age groups. One-third of respondents aged 18-24 indicated that they accessed online news and information out of "habit", while 23 per cent indicated they accessed such services by default. Of this age group, 28 per cent actively sought event-driven news, suggesting a corresponding relation to social activities and events.

When asked to nominate their favourite news and information website, 37 per cent of respondents in this age group nominated Facebook, with respondents also favouring news providers that enabled easy mechanisms through which they could share news items with their Facebook networks. Interestingly, we found the uptake of RSS feeds and news aggregator sites to be relatively low, and to be overwhelmingly concentrated among those who would be considered customisers.

Conclusion

Through online surveys and focus group discussions, this research has revealed three types of users of online news and information services in Australia: convenience users; loyal users; and customisers. Convenience users accounted for 60 per cent of those surveyed, and 84 per cent of those aged 18-24. They tended to arrive at news sites by virtue of "push" factors such as corporate email sites or Facebook, and were typically not strongly engaged with news as a media form. Loyal users were more intentional users of news sites and were more likely to seek out established news mastheads. Loyal users accounted for 30 per cent of those surveyed, and were the group most likely to be willing to pay for online news; however, this would be subject to faster wireless broadband, lower access costs and tablet devices such as the Apple iPad. Finally, customisers accounted for about 10 per cent of those surveyed: they were both the most active and engaged seekers of online news and information, the group most likely to be critical of established online news sites and the group most likely to produce their own content for online dissemination.

While these typologies are generalisations at some level, we would argue that the survey methodology was sufficiently inclusive to enable a better understanding and potential segmentation of the online news and information market in Australia. And as news providers continue to adopt and develop online news services, further research around the segmentation of the online news and information market could identify comparable, compatible and divergent consumption patterns, such as the desired level and type of interaction and user-generated content within and across user types. Consumer use of news media is changing rapidly, and some of the challenges that social media and the participative web bring to the mainstream news media sector include content innovations that favour new entrants, decentralised creativity, organisational innovation and value-adding models (OECD, 2007). For example, new forms of competition for consumer time have empowered consumers to increasingly demand interaction with online content via "produsage" (Bruns, 2008), and while our research showed that users appreciated these interactive initiatives and user-generated opportunities, it suggested they continued to place high value on professional journalism and news mastheads. The internet dramatically expands both the range of potential news offerings available to consumers and the information that media organisations have about those who access their online news sites. This will increase pressures for news content

to be tailored to particular demographics, as distinct from the mass market/mass communications models that have prevailed with 20th century news media (Flew, 2009). Whether this will provide new opportunities for user-pays media remains to be seen, and cannot be addressed independently of either the devices through which news is accessed or the service packages offered by telecommunications companies to the public.

Notes

1. Fairfax Digital is an Australian online subsidiary of Fairfax Media, the publisher of some of Australia's most long-established news titles, such as *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and *The Australian Financial Review*. The online sites of the *Herald* (www.smh.com.au) and *The Age* (www.theage.com.au) are among Australia's 25 most accessed online sites according to *Alexa.com*, with each receiving over four million site visits a month. Fairfax has been an innovator in the online news environment, establishing online-only news sites for Brisbane and south-east Queensland (www.brisbanetimes.com.au) and Perth (www.watoday.com.au) to complement their strong presence in Sydney and Melbourne, as well as sites targeted at particular interest groups (*Business Today*, *Essential Baby*, *Rugby Heaven*, and so on) and demographics (thevine.com.au, targeted at 18-29 year olds).

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Contributor notes

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